

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

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Dual Legacies of Hispanic

Cuban Exiles Find Paths to Prosperity

Immigration

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MIAMI—Life in America looks pretty good from the terrace of Ricardo Nunez's sprawling Coral Gables home.

Close in, a few steps from the family room with its giant-screen video machine, a pool sparkles among the red tiles. Just over the edge, a sleek Cigarette boat lies moored in the canal, its sharp bow pointed toward nearby Biscayne Bay.

"Everybody loves this country," Nunez said, assessing his fellow Cuban immigrants in the United States. "But probably we love it more, because it is our last refuge."

The 1 million Cubans who have immigrated to the United States since Fidel Castro took power in 1959 came mostly to get away from a government they would not accept.

At first, it was to be a temporary stay. A quarter-century has gone by with no sign of Castro's demise, however, and the Cuban Americans here increasingly have begun to unpack their psychological suitcases and carve out a place in the American refuge that has become their home.

Nunez, 50, the scion of a prominent Cuban family, said he would leave his comfortable life here only if Castro and the island's Marxist system departed and if a different government needed his services. His three sons, he predicted, will make their lives in the United States.

"The only way you can help Cuba is by having power here," Nunez said. "That is the way this country works. That is why President Reagan comes here more often now, because we have pressure groups."

Nunez already has some economic power, the fruit of work as an investment salesman and a developer. His home is in one of Miami's poshest quarters. In a candid moment, he said, smiling, that he had built it so big partly to give his Anglo neighbors a little demonstration of what Cubans can do.

Nunez and his wife, Lolly, 39, each has a car to drive down the shaded lanes winding between canals toward shopping centers. On weekends, they take the Cigarette out for high-speed romps with friends.

Nunez's eldest son, Ricardo Jr., 19, studies at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. His second son, Emilio, 18, attends Franklin and Marshall College, and the youngest, Eduardo, 9, is car-pooled to the private Bolivar Academy here. Eduardo hopes to become a football player.

Despite the signs of success, Nunez said, his Spanish name, pronounced Spanish accent and the unmistakable Cuban spin to his outlook block his access to the highest levels of U.S. society or business.

"It is clear I have some limitations, but I have to learn to live with them. I understand there is a certain point I cannot get to. It would be very difficult for me to get to be president of Coca-Cola," he said.

"You have to understand that to have a name like Nunez is not an asset. You have to understand that there is discrimination," he said, "but at the same time you have to be able to cope with it to get ahead in this great country of ours."

In many ways, the story of Cuban Americans is about getting ahead. Many, like Nunez, came from wealthy or influential families that fled with the fall of Fulgencio Batista. But many more came later with modest baggage and learned about money and success only after hard scrambling in the United States.

Felix del Rio ran a little cafe in Havana called the Recreo. After landing in the United States, he waited on tables in New York and Miami until he could afford a cafe in Spanish Harlem and, finally, a cafeteria-style restaurant in Miami's Hialeah area.

"I don't forget it," del Rio recalled, citing the hour he bought the cherished Hialeah establishment. "I get lucky."

So lucky that he has expanded the restaurant into one of Hialeah's busiest and best-known and has recently bought a second place.

Getting ahead has had a different meaning for most of the 125,000 Cubans who landed here in the 1980 Mariel boatlift. About 1,500 are detained in Atlanta on grounds that crimes committed in Cuba or arrests in the United States make them unsuitable to live here. For them, getting ahead will mean getting out.

For Jesus Sarmiento, however, it has meant graduating from Florida International University as the first Mariel refugee to earn a U.S. college degree.

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For 250 others this month, it meant graduating from federally financed English lessons at Dade County Community College, armed to join the more than two thirds of Mariel refugees who have settled and found a job here.

Settling into life has meant different battles for Nunez. Last fall he ran in the Republican Party congressional primary against a younger candidate, also Cuban American, who was supported by the national GOP organization.

Nunez, better-known among Cuban voters, won the primary but lost decisively in general elections to the venerable Florida Democrat, Rep. Claude Pepper.

It was not his first foray into politics. In 1975, Gerald R. Ford made Nunez the first Cuban American to gain a presidential appointment, naming him to head the Cuban Refugee Program that had ballooned

since 1959 into the largest U.S. refugee-aid effort with an annual budget of \$90 million.

After clearing him for the job, the FBI reopened an inquiry on the basis of lawsuits alleging that Nunez's construction firm had failed to pay for materials and attorneys' services.

Also in the background were complaints that Nunez was treating the agency as a Cuban political organization and memories of Nunez's earlier role as a salesman for a collapsed Bahamas-based investment fund connected to the fugitive financier Robert Vesco.

The FBI found no wrongdoing on Nunez's part. He ran the program until President Jimmy Carter, whose attitude toward Castro's Cuba Nunez could not accept, took office.

Nunez's attitude toward Castro had long been defined. His father was Cuban ambassador to the United Nations when Batista fell, and Nunez came to the United States in 1960 from Spain, a young lawyer with no way to go home.

His dislike of Castro led Nunez to work with the CIA as it prepared the ill-fated 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. To this day, Nunez does not contact his relatives in Cuba for fear that association with him could bring them harm.

Nunez has raised all his children speaking Spanish. Still, the children nevertheless exhibit only passing curiosity about his native island, Nunez said.

Their English is pure Florida American, and Nunez predicted that all avenues to success in the United States—even those still closed to him—would be open, as open as his family used to find them in Cuba before Castro.